

VZCZCXRO8791
PP RUEHDBU RUEHIK RUEHYG
DE RUEHBUL #0028/01 0041016
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 041016Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 5180
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHINGTON DC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 000028

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: NEW AFGHAN NATIONAL COMMUNICATION COORDINATION
CENTER ESTABLISHED

11. (U) SUMMARY: With active encouragement and support from the international community (IC) and especially Embassy Kabul, the Government of Afghanistan established the National Communication Coordinating Center (known as the NCCC or NC3) in early December 2006. Although the GOA is still identifying adequate personnel and operating resources to make the NC3 fully operational, a small team of international (primarily U.S.) advisors and Afghan support staff, working full-time since the Center's approval by the Policy Action Group, has already begun to show the GOA how, through coordinated planning and consistent messages, to improve public perceptions of the country's progress in general and the GOA's own performance in particular. END SUMMARY

Need for Better Strategic Communications

12. (U) The May 29, 2006 riots in Kabul and the growing insurgency in the South focused the international donor and military's attention on the Government of Afghanistan's (GOA) inability to communicate effectively with its own citizens. Publicity about reconstruction and development efforts was limited to announcements of awards of new money, with no follow-on stories about completion of projects or improvements in delivery of services. On the security side, publicity focused on military actions and casualty counts. The GOA had no pro-active message on the reasons for permitting Coalition Forces to pursue terrorists on Afghan soil nor the purpose of inviting NATO/ISAF forces to assist in providing security.

13. (U) This lack of GOA strategic communications was first taken up during the July 2006 creation of the Policy Action Group (PAG) which consists of three pillars)- security, intelligence, and reconstruction/development)- and a Strategic Communications Working Group (SCWG), led by the GOA's Minister of Information (rather than by the President's Office, as the IC had recommended) to coordinate public diplomacy activities in pursuit of the PAG's objectives. The SCWG meets weekly in response to a primary Presidential Directive to help reconnect the central

government to the citizens in the South, primarily using traditional means of communications.

14. (U) During the SCWG,s formative first three months, Embassy Kabul DCM represented the U.S. at its meetings. A USAID contractor, whose services the Embassy provided to the SCWG full-time, also attended as did U.S. military PAOs from ISAF and CFC-A. Embassy Kabul PAO, who chairs the Mission-wide Joint Public Affairs Coordinating Committee (JPACC), now serves as the Embassy's representative. Three SCWG sub-groups)- security, traditional communications, and reconstruction and development)- meet weekly to develop and recommend appropriate public diplomacy tools in these three areas.

15. (U) To guarantee the implementation of SCWG recommendations, the U.S. proposed in September 2006 the establishment of a SCWG media war room, using existing GOA resources and USAID contractor support. SCWG became convinced of the utility of a Secretariat that could address the public affairs issues relating to the situation in the South. By late November, in close collaboration with two U.S. Army Public Affairs and Operations Specialists from CFC-A, and with the active support and encouragement of the Embassy, a senior staff member of the GOA,s National Security Council had developed, and the PAG had approved, a plan very similar to that originally proposed by the U.S. The NCCC was thus established.

Role of NCCC and Staffing Plans

16. (U) The NCCC takes direction and gets approval for its

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proposals at the weekly meetings of the SCWG, but it operates under the day-to-day leadership of a senior member of the GOA,s National Security Council. The NCCC is designed to provide Afghan citizens information about reform and reconstruction efforts. Its other main function is to coordinate the communications efforts of ministries and provincial governors in order to create a frequent and steady flow of information on improvements in security, development and governance.

17. (U) USAID quickly provided a funding mechanism to hire six Afghan professionals to form a Secretariat for the NCCC and SCWG. These positions are expected to be filled in mid-January. The British Embassy will provide an operating budget for the Kabul-based Center. NATO/ISAF, CFC-A and the US Embassy have all seconded full-time international communications advisors to the NCCC. The U.S. advisor, funded by USAID, brings a staff of four Afghan professionals, with four more positions pending, one each for the four Southern provinces. The NCCC team works from a large former private residence, provided by the GOA,s NSC, at which all SCWG meetings are now held. If all goes according to plan, the Center will ultimately include press conference facilities as well as a center from which journalists covering events can file reports. Meanwhile, the GOA has also provided its own funding for programmatic use pending the receipt of appropriate proposals.

NCCC Products: Off To A Good Start

18. (U) In its first month of operation, even without a full staff, the NCCC has begun producing useful communications products, including pocket-sized thematic message cards which are delivered weekly to all Ministers, Ambassadors, generals and other principals. An opportunity was also seized to use Hajjis returning to Kandahar to deliver positive messages to friends and relatives who would be welcoming them home after their 40 day pilgrimage. This simple brochure, which features photos of President Karzai,s inspiring visit to Kandahar province in December, delivers the message that the

Government of Afghanistan helps all Afghans fulfill their obligations to get an education and go on the Hajj. It tells Hajjis they have a responsibility to help communities protect their schools and teachers, which have become prime targets for insurgents. The brochure, which has been distributed at mosques in the south and is being given to all Hajjis boarding flights to Kandahar, represents a significant step in the NCCC,s efforts to move the GOA away from blaming outsiders for problems in security and development in favor of delivering Calls to Action for citizens to participate in security and development efforts.

¶9. (U) At this point, pending the selection of a full-time Afghan professional staff (which the U.S. and other IC advisors will continue to mentor), the NCCC has not yet opened to Afghan journalists. It is hoped that a formal opening can be held in February or March with the introduction of full-time professional assistance to GOA officials and journalists alike. Although USAID and other international players can provide resources to improve the flow of information through the mass media, the NCCC also needs technical assistance in using the traditional channels of communications in the conservative South. In the meantime, while the GOA continues to look for additional programmatic and other resources for the NCCC, donor organizations and coalition forces are helping the GOA Ministries to identify weekly examples of concrete improvements in security and development.

¶10. (U) While there is still much to be done, the NCCC,s progress in the first month of its existence suggests that, with adequate support, it can make a significant difference in helping the GOA learn to better communicate with its

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citizens and, in so doing, inspire greater faith in their government as well as in their own abilities to positively effect their country,s future. Post will provide updates.
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